

Client: Utah
Source: The Independent (Web)
Date: 27 January 2011
Page: N/A
Reach: 221692
Value: 5944



Welcome to Utah please shoot carefully

It's hardly the most sensitive timing, given recent events in neighbouring Arizona, but politicians in the God-fearing, gun-loving State of Utah are set to pass landmark legislation that will make an automatic pistol their official "state firearm".

The Browning M1911, which was invented exactly 100 years ago in Ogden, just north of Salt Lake City, will become the 25th "state symbol", joining such items as a tree, a folk dance, and a cooking pot (the Dutch oven) on the list of things supposed to reflect the best of the history, geography and culture of Utah.

Supporters of the move, led by the Republican lawmaker Carl Wimmer, said they hoped to honour the memory of John M. Browning, the founder of the gun-making firm. Thanks to the success of the M1911, his business has become world famous, growing over the decades into one of the region's most valuable employers.

"This pistol is Utah," declared Mr Wimmer, brandishing one of the pistols before local journalists. "Its history is emblazoned on our state." His initiative is now expected to sail through the highly conservative state's House of Representatives in the coming weeks.

John M Browning, whose father Jonathan was one of the Mormon pioneers who first settled in Utah, has played an intrinsic role in protecting the Constitution of the United States, Mr Wimmer argued. "He invented a firearm that has defended American values and the traditions of this country for 100 years," he said.

The M1911 was chosen because of its popularity among the military and police officers, as well as the roughly 45 per cent of Utah's 2,700,000 citizens who keep at least one firearm around the house. The mountainous and predominately rural state has some of the most relaxed gun laws in America, which in turn has the most relaxed gun laws in the developed world.

The move has left gun-control advocates wondering whether an implement designed for killing people represents the sort of values and traditions that any state in the US should be celebrating, particularly after the Tucson massacre, in which six people were killed by a gunman wielding a similar sort of firearm to the Browning pistol.

"Semi-automatic pistols are the weapons of choice of those who are committing massacres," Steve Gunn, of the Gun Violence Prevention Center, told Utah's Desert News. "It's an embarrassment to the state to have as a symbol that was used only a few weeks ago to kill innocent people." Their argument was met by a swift rebuttal from Mr Wimmer, though. "There is nothing about the actions of a madman to change the fact that firearms have been used throughout our history to defend American values and traditions," he said.

A his fellow Republican, Stephen Sandstrom, who is also supporting the move, told the Associated Press that he believes the M1911 should not be demonised for killing people. Instead, he argued, the weapon should be credited for having saved American lives on the battlefield.

"Tragic events happen because of bad people in this world, but handguns, and firearms in general, do not kill people," he declared. "We need to stop demonising firearms."

The legislation to create Utah's first state firearm is not the only impending political victory for its more trigger-happy residents. Another Republican, Curt Oda, has found himself at the centre of controversy after unveiling a bill that will allow locals to kill any animal, including cats, rodents and pigeons, which they believe to



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be feral.

Animal-rights activists have been highly critical of the proposed law, saying it will lead to a "free for all" in which family pets across Utah will face execution if they happen to set foot on the wrong person's property, since it is difficult to determine, at a glance, whether a creature is actually feral. The legislation is nonetheless also expected to be passed.

Mr Oda told reporters that he has received almost 500 critical emails, many containing death threats, after his bill made the national news. It allows for creatures believed to be feral to be dispatched by "humane killing" techniques that include clubbing, shooting, and decapitation.

In an interview with the Salt Lake Tribune, Mr Oda nonetheless described himself as an animal lover. "I grew up with animals all my life, my wife and I are big dog lovers, and I don't dislike cats," he said. "But I hate those pigeons. They are dirty and nasty. I have a friend who lost a lung because of the toxicity of the faeces."

Other state symbols

Oklahoma: Gusty the weather cartoon

Gusty was an animated gust of wind used on one of Oklahoma's regional television channels from 1954 to 1989. Gusty was so popular it was adopted as the state mascot in 2005 and became the only US state to have a cartoon character as one of its symbols.

Massachusetts: Baked beans

Recognised as an official state symbol in 1993, baked beans (or "navy" beans) are believed to be one of the first traditional Native American dishes that European settlers learnt to make. Boston is still nicknamed "Beantown".

Maryland: Jousting

Named Maryland's official sport symbol in 1962, jousting was a popular pastime among the state's earliest 17th-century settlers.

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